

A Tribute to Mary Woodard Lasker



When we think of what is good and right in this world, we think of Mary Woodard Lasker. When Mrs. Lasker died on February 21st, at the age of 93, she was universally described as a woman of vision, compassion, elegance, and beauty. A philanthropist with limitless determination, Mrs. Lasker was known for her enduring commitment to

support new and important medical research.

So extraordinary was Mrs. Lasker's championship of medical research that she was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Congress named a center at the National Institutes of Health the Mary Woodard Lasker Center for Health Research and Education. And she received a Congressional Gold Medal for her humanitarian contributions in medical research and education, as well as for her extraordinary efforts on behalf of urban beautification and the fine arts.

Mrs. Lasker's love for parks and gardens was legendary. She helped fund hundreds of tree and bulb planting projects, in New York City and Washington, DC. Legend has it that some years she was second only to the Queen of England in the quantity of tulip bulbs she ordered from Holland. In 1985, Mrs. Lasker was honored with a new variety of pink tulip named for her. (It will be available for purchase this fall.)

Mrs. Lasker's passion for urban beautification was matched by her passion for her work with the American Cancer Society, of which she was Honorary Chairman of the Board. When she died, the Society's officers, Dr. Irvin D. Fleming (President) and Larry K. Fuller (Chairman of the Board), called her "our pioneer co-founder." They went on to say, "She may have contributed more to medical research in the United States than any other citizen."

In an interview 10 years ago, Mrs. Lasker explained how she became involved with the Society: "In 1943 my housekeeper was diagnosed as having cancer of the uterus and the doctors said that nothing could be done. I was shocked. I learned that there was practically no research. I went to the American Cancer Society, which was then the American Society to Control Cancer, and found that the Women's Field Army was raising about \$240,000 a year. The Society was doing nothing about research. There wasn't enough money."

She spoke with her husband, advertising executive Albert Lasker. He called on the president of NBC and soon two of the network's most popular radio shows, "Fibber McGee and Molly" and "Bob Hope," gave serious messages about the need for money for cancer research. Meanwhile, Mary Lasker was able to interest *Reader's Digest* in the same message. As Mrs. Lasker said, "The checks poured into the Society, so many they had to send the envelopes to a bank and have the tellers open them."

The Laskers became the driving force behind the Society's

emerging research program. They insisted that funding be given to accredited scientific and clinical investigators in recognized, responsible institutions across the country. Mrs. Lasker offered to hire and pay professional fundraisers in 1945 if 25% of all funds raised were earmarked for research. Her offer was accepted and this percentage has been the minimum the American Cancer Society has spent on research ever since.

Mr. and Mrs. Lasker had already established (in 1942)

the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation to raise awareness about major diseases and the need for increased research funding. In 1944, they began a tradition that continues to this day to honor physicians and scientists for outstanding achievements in research. So many of those they honored went on to become Nobel Laureates, that receiving a Lasker Award came to be thought of as a predictor of who would win the Nobel Prize.

The Laskers believed the only way to speed progress against cancer was to involve the government more deeply in funding research. So, Mrs. Lasker began to lobby the federal government to spend more on research.

After Mr. Lasker's death in 1952, Mary Lasker continued to have a regular presence in Washington. She persuaded Congress to budget more money for research into cancer, heart disease, mental illness, blindness, and other major killing and crippling diseases.

One of Mrs. Lasker's greatest achievements came in 1971, with passage of the National Cancer Act. She lobbied Congress tirelessly to pass the Act, which restructured the National Cancer Institute and dramatically increased its funding.

We in the American Cancer Society like to think of Mrs. Lasker as "our own." But other institutions and causes also claimed her as advocate, friend, and supporter.

When Mrs. Lasker died, the dean of Harvard University's School of Public Health wrote in *The New York Times*, "Mrs. Lasker was an extraordinary woman, who transformed our nation's capacity for scientific discovery."

The dean of Health Sciences at Columbia University wrote, "Her love of beauty and advocacy for science endeared her to heads of nations and people from all walks of life."

And executives of the American Foundation for AIDS Research wrote, "She was a dedicated supporter of biomedical research to relieve the ills of the body and she believed in art and the beauty of nature to nurture the soul. To these she dedicated her long and beautiful life. We shall always be grateful to her."

And we in the American Cancer Society will also remain grateful to Mary Lasker, as we appreciate what she left behind: A legacy of parks and gardens that brighten our urban landscapes, and a legion of survivors of cancer and other diseases who might not have had a chance to live were it not for the unparalleled vision and efforts of one woman.

- Cynthia A. Gelb